Ever since I first put foot in a university classroom as a professor of religious studies, I have been firmly committed to the constitutional separation of church and state. I have never seen it to be my mission either to convert someone to a new religious point of view or to deconvert them from their old one. My goals have been to teach about the history and literature of the New Testament from a non-confessional point of view and to make students think hard about whatever their views might be. The goal is not religious but humanistic — as is appropriate in a secular research university — namely, to help students learn how to think.

There are few subjects that are more perfectly suited to the university’s ultimate goal of training thinking human beings than religious studies, especially in the part of the world where I teach, the American South. Nearly all of my students come into class with a lifelong belief involving the material we cover in the syllabus. Most of my students have an idea about what they think the Bible is, and more than that, a commitment to the Bible as a sacred text. In the class I do not at all challenge the idea that the Bible is or should be sacred. That would be a theological evaluation, and I’m not in the business of doing theology. I do, however, approach the Bible in a way strikingly different from how students are accustomed to seeing it treated, by considering it as a historical and literary set of texts that can be studied without religious assumptions. When the Bible is approached that way, different kinds of conclusions emerge than students have been raised on. They find their old views challenged. And they have to think about it to reconcile what they are learning with what they have always thought.

This is very different from other kinds of subjects taught in the curriculum.

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